

Dana E. Katz. *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xi + 228 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4085-6.

Reviewed by Adam Shear (University of Pittsburgh)

Published on H-HRE (October, 2012)

Commissioned by Amy R. Caldwell



## Representations of Violence and Real Life

Dana E. Katz's monograph is an important contribution to the history of late medieval and early modern Europe. Although Katz's thorough research takes in a very wide array of objects, including paintings, frescos, sculpture, and woodcuts, the work is not a survey or typology of images of Jews in Renaissance Italian art. While Katz is interested in analyzing specific works of art in terms of their relations to iconographic traditions, she also analyzes the ways that the specific works reflect—and help shape—political and social life. That is, she not only examines the works of art for what might be called “content,” but studies the circumstances of their production as evidence for the reconstruction of social relations. In doing so, she approaches the works of art not as canonical masterpieces (although some of the paintings are by well-known artists), but as pieces of evidence that help answer historical questions. In this sense, Katz's work is both “art historical” and “historical” and transcends the boundaries of disciplines while demonstrating mastery of disciplinary tools and methods.

Examining carefully the representation of Jews in five different fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian political contexts (Urbino, Mantua, Ferrara, Florence, and Trent), Katz argues that “representational violence” against Jews cannot always be correlated with physical violence against Jews, and that, in certain political circumstances, anti-Jewish imagery allowed for the protection of Jewish lives. The first three case studies are of small courtly states (Urbino, Mantua, Ferrara) in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. These form a rel-

atively coherent unit for analysis of princely or aristocratic states and their relation to Jews. The last two chapters offer a comparative perspective in examining republican Florence and imperial Trent.

The chapter on Urbino (chapter 1) focuses on the late-fifteenth-century altarpiece in the church of the Confraternity of Corpus Domini. The piece consists of two parts: the main panel, by Joos van Ghent, is a depiction of the “Communion of the Apostles” with the ruler of Urbino, Duke Federico da Montefeltro, and his court in the background. The predella below the main panel was painted by Paolo Uccello, and consists of a series of panels narrating a host desecration accusation against a Jewish family, entitled “Miracle of the Profane Host.” The predella was completed some eight years before the main panel, and Katz argues that the combination of the two paintings “represents Duke Federigo's policy on Jews” and “worked to mollify the Christian community's fears of external threats, specifically, the threatened invasion of Ottoman Turks, by turning attention to its also to internal adversary, the local Jews.” Katz calls this a “pictorialized purgation” and argues that it functions to both vilify the local Jews but also offer a paradigm for tolerating a Jewish presence in the city: it “symbolically avenges the blasphemous act of only those Jews complicit in host desecration, leaving the larger Jewish community safe within Urbino's city walls” (p. 16).

The predella in the Urbino altarpiece is based on legendary accounts that circulated in literary texts and art

of a host desecration accusation in Paris in the thirteenth century. Indeed, as Katz points out, there are no known incidents of host desecration accusations and relatively few literary accounts extant from late medieval or early modern Italy. In contrast, chapter 2 deals with events that took place in Mantua and their commemoration in art and architecture. The main story is of the banker Daniele da Norsa and his punishment for blasphemy, a result of his removal of a fresco depicting the Madonna and Child from the side of his house in 1493. Da Norsa had permission from the bishop and was initially protected by Isabella d'Este while her husband, Francesco Gonzaga, was away. Later, Francesco reversed her decision and ordered the razing of Da Norsa's house in order to construct a new church that would house an altarpiece by Mantegna to be paid for by Da Norsa. A few years later, another painting of the Madonna and Child with the Norsa family below the holy pair was also added to the church. So the basic story is of apparent blasphemy against Christianity by a Jew by a desecration of an image of the Madonna and child, an initial attempt to protect the Jews from the anger of the public, a change in state and church policy (as the public's anger does not abate), and a reversal which punishes the Jew by forcing him to reverse the trajectory of events: the Christian space had been replaced by a Jewish home; now the Jewish house would be removed for a new Christian space housing new images of the Mother and Child. As Katz carefully argues, each of these new images, especially Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria*, encode the image that the regime wants to project as well as preserve a kind of narration of the events leading up to their creation.

For Katz, this is part of a complicated dynamic that preserves political order through a process of scapegoating: "Identified as a source of pollution threatening Mantuan social order, Daniela was forced to finance Mantegna's altarpiece as a compensatory fee for his blasphemous transgression. The *Madonna della Vittoria* thus serves as political propaganda, eclipsing Francesco's strategic missteps while channeling popular discontent away from the illustrious marquis onto the Jewish victim Daniele. The scapegoating process helped construct a more coherent and unified polity, harmonizing disparate elements of Mantuan society behind Francesco's authority" (p.48).

In chapter 3, Katz turns to Ferrara in the early sixteenth century, another princely state with a reputation for protection and toleration of Jews. Here, she moves from depiction of a local incident (the Norsa case in Mantua) and local refraction of a distant incident (the re-

ception in Urbino of a much earlier story from Paris) to the localization of a broad theological construct. The main subject of this chapter is a 1523 painting by Benvenuto Tisi (Garofalo) for the refectory of an Augustinian monastery attached to the Church of Sant' Andrea, *Crucifix with Ecclesia and Synagoga*. (The work now hangs in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara.) Katz argues that Garofalo's painting represents a visual representation of the Augustinian paradigm of toleration for Jews within a Christian society. In this paradigm, which Jeremy Cohen has argued became the theological foundation underpinning medieval Latin Christendom's treatment of Jews, Jews serve as "living witnesses" to the truth of Christianity in a dual sense: as the carriers and transmitters of the Old Testament and as an oppressed group whose debased status as a result of their failure to accept Christ serves as visible confirmation of the validity of the new covenant.[1] At the same time, however, Katz finds evidence in the painting of an implicit rejection of the kind of toleration implicit in Augustine's theology and thus the painting and its presence in the Augustinian refectory becomes a complex representation of the ever-tenuous position of Jews and Judaism in Christian society. Rather than offer an unambiguous endorsement of Jewish presence in Christendom, the Augustinian paradigm represented a framework of contestation.

Chapter 4 considers (relatively rare) popular violence against Jews in republican Florence in the aftermath of a 1493 incident in which a Spanish *converso* desecrated sculptures of the Madonna at Orsanmichele and at a hospital in San Nofri, and perhaps a painting at Santa Maria in Campo. Here Katz is interested both in the dynamics of the incident and the somewhat surprising later commemoration of the violence by Florentine authorities. State authorities usually wish to repress memories of popular disorder and to warn the populace against such disorder; in this case, however, Katz suggests that the warning was to the Jewish population of the dangers of any public challenge to Christianity (as well as a republican challenge to the Medici).

Chapter 5 focuses on the spread and promotion of the cult of Simon of Trent, the victim in the most famous ritual murder accusation case of the fifteenth century. Katz concentrates on two sets of images depicting the libel: woodcuts that circulated throughout Europe as a result of the new technology of the printing press and frescos painted in several churches in villages in the countryside surrounding Trent. Katz argues that publication and republication of woodcuts promoted a pilgrimage to Trent itself and the frescos offered an export of the ensuing

cult of Simon to the Tridentine hinterland. In this way, these anti-Jewish images proved crucial to the formation of “communitas” in this Italian-German border region.

Katz’s work contributes to the growing literature on the meaning of tolerance and toleration in premodern Europe and on the ways that the mechanics of toleration differed from post-Enlightenment societies. Katz also joins an interesting discussion by historians like David Nirenberg, Sara Lipton, and Robert Bonfil on the role of violence in maintaining (as opposed to merely disrupting) paradigms of premodern toleration of Jews (pp. 6-10). Another aspect to this discussion is the notion of scapegoating as a tool of politics rather than some kind of byproduct of “intolerance.” However, Katz differs from Nirenberg in assessing the difference between “symbolic” and “physical” violence. While for Nirenberg any sort of regularized or ritualized violence is seen paradoxically as maintaining social order, here Katz distinguishes between symbolic or representational violence and physical harm. (Sticks and stones may break my bones ... ) For example, in chapter 3, she argues that the painting by Garafolo does not refer to specific violence against “real Jews” but is a representation of the framework of Augustinian anti-Judaism (see p. 71). Indeed, as a representation of a theoretical abstraction, one might see this painting as removed twice over from “physical violence.”

Indeed in the Urbino case study, *symbolic* violence against Jews indicates how protection of a ruler like Federigo, who later had a reputation as tolerant of Jews, works in practice (pp. 18-19). Katz argues: “[Jews of Urbino] endured symbolic forms of violence as a result of their vulnerability, inability to retaliate, and lack of communal allies. I explore how violence against Jews functioned in Duke Federigo’s campaign of toleration and how dynamics of tolerance inevitably are linked to civic identity” (p. 19).

As a result of her closely argued analysis of each situation, Katz contributes to all the major debates in the historiography of Jewish-Christian relations: how to read

anti-Jewish images, how to interpret violence, what happens to Augustinian paradigm, how does protection of the ruler work (or not work). It is worth remembering that Jewish policies were not only pursued in isolation but as part of larger political situation. This has become well known in the study of the expulsions of Jews from England and Spain. Katz’s work enables us to see how this works in other settings. In the Florence case, Katz shows us how the failure to protect Jews was related to larger failures of the state. In this sense, accusations against Jews and the social conditions behind them and the impact of the former on politics and social conditions are matters that belong not only to Jewish history but to so-called general European history as well.

Katz references Stuart Hall’s notion that identity is constantly in production (p. 3, n. 4). Her work nicely illustrates this by pointing out how Christians (and Jews) engaged with the works of art over time. The analysis of the social and political functions of the works of art might have been richer if Katz had explicitly discussed the differences between short-term understanding among intended audiences and long-term aspects of public memory. That is, how long can the subtext be passed down along with the image? For example, will all viewers see what Katz says we are supposed to see in the women’s faces in the Norsa Madonna (pp. 60-61), without Katz’s elaboration of the context—or an ongoing transmission of the story in the collective memory of Mantuans?

But these questions can be explored and addressed in future work by Katz and others and are testament to the way that Katz’s work opens up new research questions. *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* is an impressive achievement and one that should influence the way that historians and art historians approach not only this material but similar material and issues.

#### Note

[1]. See Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-hre>

**Citation:** Adam Shear. Review of Katz, Dana E., *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*. H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37022>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.